

A Cry for Help – Exodus 2:23-25

Introduction to Release International

[S2▶] Release International is a Christian ministry called by God to love and serve persecuted Christians. [S3▶] We were founded in 1968 through the inspiration of Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian pastor who was imprisoned for his faith for 14 years during the Communist era. Some of you may have read his well-known book *Tortured for Christ* which tells his story. After he was released, Richard was able to escape to the West and he made it his mission to let Christians here know about their fellow believers suffering persecution, and to challenge us to stand with them.

[S4▶] Today we continue that legacy. We work with partners on the ground in around 30 countries across the world bringing all kinds of prayerful, pastoral and practical support to Christians who suffer because of their faith. [S5▶] And there is also an important UK facing side to the ministry. We want to call Christians in the UK into fellowship with our persecuted brothers and sisters so we can support them, but also so that we can learn lessons of Christian discipleship with them.

Bible Reflection - Background

[S6▶] One of the things we always want to do at Release International is to have a biblical perspective on persecution. We should be moved by the humanitarian tragedy of the situation, but we also need to think about persecution at a deeper theological level. And when we read the Bible, we find out that it has a lot to say about the subject. So I want to share some verses with you just now from the book of Exodus which will help us to think through how we should respond. This is Exodus 2:23-25. [S7▶]

²³ During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. ²⁵ So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them. (NIVUK)

At the end of the book of Genesis, after an amazing series of events, Abraham's great grandson Joseph had become the prime minister of Egypt. There was a famine in the region and, in order to avoid starvation, Joseph had brought his whole family down to Egypt where they were treated well and given a special area of land to live on. Over the next few generations the family grew and prospered, but here at the start of the book of Exodus around 400 years later, we are told that a new king came to power in Egypt and he did not remember Joseph. Joseph's great legacy had been forgotten and now instead of seeing the Hebrew people as a blessing, the Egyptians resent them.

Pharaoh portrays the Israelites as a dangerous minority who are becoming too strong for their own good. He picks on their 'otherness' and assumes the worst of them. And this has disastrous consequences for God's people. Pharaoh makes them work as slaves and treats them ruthlessly.

Can you imagine what this must have been like for the people of God? Waking up every day to face the burden of hatred and slavery. Beaten down and oppressed. No representation, no voice, and no prospects for the future.

Voice Magazine Story – Rajendra

[S8▶] Religious freedom is deteriorating badly in India just now and Christians are suffering increased oppression as a result. Hindu fundamentalists believe that to be Indian is to be Hindu and anyone who follows a different religion is considered disloyal and a second-class citizen. 12 out of 28 states have now passed 'anti-conversion' laws which means that Christians who simply offer to pray for someone or give away a Bible are at risk of arrest.

[S9▶] In our current *Voice* magazine we tell the story of Pastor Rajendra. As he walked home from leading a service at his village church, he found himself surrounded by a gang of eight men who attacked him with swords and metal rods. They beat him severely and left him for dead. The gang who attacked him were not robbers but religious fanatics who wanted to drive him, his church and all traces of Christianity out of their village.

Thankfully Rajendra was saved by someone who found him and took him to hospital. After his initial treatment Release International's partner was able to provide him with further physiotherapy and help with transport. Rajendra continues to minister in the same village, and he prays that one day his attackers will come to faith and understand the forgiving love of Christ.

Bible Reflection – God heard, remembered, looked and was concerned

[S10▶] Verse 23 in Exodus 2 says that the people of Israel groaned in their slavery. They were in pain and they were in despair, and their suffering caused them to groan. But that is not all they did. In their groaning they also cried out for help. They directed their cries to heaven and asked for God's help.

Groaning in these kinds of circumstances is natural and understandable but by itself groaning is not a positive action. It keeps the focus at the horizontal level of suffering and difficulty. However, when groaning is transformed into a cry for help - when it becomes a prayer - then it assumes power to change the situation.

Verses 24-25 tell us how God responds to this cry for help. First, **God heard** their groaning. Of course, God already knew about their suffering - he knows everything. But now that his people were crying to him for help a conversation had begun. In the same

way that a mother recognises the anxious voice of her child across a crowded playground, God heard the anxious cries of his people. God wants us to tell him about our suffering and the suffering of those we care about. He wants us to invite him into the situation.

Second, **God remembered** his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Again, it is not as if God had forgotten. Exodus chapter 1 tells us that despite the oppression of Pharaoh, the people of Israel had continued to multiply. Even in their suffering God was being faithful to his promise to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. But now that his people are crying to him for help, it is as if the Lord is specially moved to honour the benefits of his covenant. The next chapter in Exodus is the account of Moses being commissioned to confront Pharaoh and lead God's people out of Egypt. This is the moment when the plan of redemption really takes off and it happens in the narrative immediately after the cry for help. There is something special about prayer. In God's divine wisdom our cries for help move him to act.

Third, **God looked**. The Lord is the all-seeing God. He knows every detail. There can be no such thing as a miscarriage of justice with God because he has all the evidence right in front of him. And that gives us great confidence when we cry to him for help. We don't have to convince him with a watertight case. He is already well aware of what is happening. We just have to ask him to do something.

And finally, **God was concerned**. This is more than just being aware. In Hebrew the word implies intimate knowledge. It means that God was closely concerned about his people's suffering, and he was deeply moved by it. You could almost say he felt the pain himself. We know what this feels like to some extent with our own children. We care so deeply for them that everything that happens to them has a huge emotional impact on us. This is how God cares for his children.

When God's people cry out to him he hears, he remembers his covenant, he looks, and he is deeply concerned. All of this gives us great incentive to pray for God's people today who are suffering oppression and persecution. In the will of God, our cry for help on their behalf can be a powerful agent of change in their circumstances.

Call to action

[S11▶] Please do pick up a copy of the *Voice* magazine at the table afterwards so you can find out more about the work of Release International. The magazine comes with a daily prayer diary to help you pray for persecuted Christians in an informed way. It's free and if you fill in one of our *Stay in Touch* cards, we will send it to you regularly by post or email along with some of our other news and prayer communications.

As we have seen, praying is one of the most important things we can do for our persecuted brothers and sisters, so please do sign-up to get this information today. And there are lots of other resources available on our website, YouTube channel and podcast.

[S12▶] And finally, please do consider giving financially towards Release International's work. In the current *Voice* magazine we tell the story of Iffat from Pakistan. Christians in Pakistan face oppression and marginalisation. Many are trapped in poverty with few opportunities to improve their situation. And in this setting Christian women are particularly vulnerable.

Iffat is a member of a Strength to Stand group which provides spiritual, social, economic and leadership support to vulnerable Christian women. With the help of her group, Iffat was able to buy a sewing machine and start a small business making and repairing clothes. Her family had been struggling financially to the point where the electricity in their home had been cut off. But now Iffat makes enough money to support her family and their lives are improving. Release International supports more than 350 Strength to Stand groups in Pakistan which are helping to transform the lives of thousands of Christian women like Iffat and their families.

In Romans 12:13, the Apostle Paul encourages us to 'share with the Lord's people who are in need.' By giving to the work of Release International you can make a significant contribution to the many needs of persecuted Christians in places like Pakistan, India and many other countries. You can make a donation here today, through the card in the *Voice* magazine, or you can go to our website www.releaseinternational.org to give online.

[S13▶] Thank you very much for the opportunity to share with you this morning. May God bless you.